Sermons and Tracts T

SERIOUS HINTS:

Respectfully addressed to the Consideration

OF

THE CLERGY,

AT THIS MOMENTOUS CRISIS:

IN A

SERMON

Preached before the University of OXFORD,
on Sunday, February 4, 1798.

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BRITISH MUSEUM

A SERMON.

Isa. Chap. i. 9.

Except the Lord of Hoſts had left us a very ſmall Remnant, we ſhould have been as Sodom, and we ſhould have been like unto Gomorrah.

THE times of the prophet, as appears from the general hiſtory of this period, as well as from the frightful detail of crimes given in the context, were times of almoſt univerſal depravity and impending ruin.

Whoever has examined the hiſtory of nations, and particularly as recorded in ſcripture, has not failed to remark, (and he will certainly

conſider it as the moſt calamitous ſymptom in the moral character of any country) that at ſuch periods, the general ſenſe has not been more unfavourable to the faithful repreſentation of its errors, than forward to repel the means inſtituted by providence for their reformation and recovery. He has moreover found occaſion to obſerve that, this temper has, in every age, been the moſt formidable of thoſe impediments with which the miniſters of religion have had to contend:—that it has contributed more, than all their other difficulties combined, to diſcourage the holy ardour of their zeal, and to defeat the pure and diſintereſted efforts of their benevolence.

To ſtand forward in the character of public cenſors, and, at a time, when, if the public ſenſe had been diſtinctly avowed, the reprehenſion of vice muſt have been pronounced the greateſt crime, was certainly no enviable diſtinction:— but, if the prophets would faithfully diſcharge their duty, there was no alternative; they muſt either betray their truſt or become the accuſers of their nation.

Allowing then for the diſtinction of office, and admitting, in their full extent, thoſe important ſhades of difference which diſcriminate between the duties of the ancient prophet and of the ordinary miniſter of chriſtianity; there are nevertheleſs ſome leading points of duty common to both. To ſhew the people their tranſgreſsions, faithfully to mark the darker ſhades of enormity, to depict the more flagrant colours of public crime, to purſue iniquity in its fearful progreſs and to trace the errors of a whole people to their ſource:—to point out and to enforce the means of reformation, and to ſhew, as well from expreſs denunciations of ſcripture as from the whole analogy of the divine adminiſtration, the certain and exemplary ruin that muſt follow on the final neglect of ſuch means—are duties, which the ancient prophet dared to fulfil, and from which the chriſtian miniſter muſt not be deterred.

That theſe topics may ſometimes have been choſen as the vehicles of popular declamation or of an ill-timed and cenſorious zeal, are ſuppoſitions which, on this occaſion, we are nei-

ther concerned to refuſe nor to admit: all that can fairly be obſerved upon them is, that the abuſe of an eſtabliſhed duty, while it ought not to be imitated, ſhould not be admitted as an objection to the duty itſelf; and it will then be too late to plead in our excuſe the abuſe of others, when it ſhall be proved (which God prevent) that the people have periſhed through our neglect.

But the importance of theſe introductory remarks will be better ſhewn by an immediate attention to the words of the text. The prophet, after enumerating ſome of the moſt prominent crimes of Iſrael, proceeds to the awful but inſtructive declaration before us—"Except "the Lord of Hoſts had, at this conjuncture, left "amongſt us a very ſmall remnant, a people "that feared him; the immorality of the nation "would have become as univerſal, and its over-"throw as total and complete, as that of the "devoted cities of Sodom and Gomorrah."

What then are the truths to which this paſſage calls our attention? and, what the uſes

which, in our individual and national capacity, we ſhould endeavour, at this eventful moment, to collect from it?

It, in the firſt place, ſhews us that it is of the very nature and tendency of *ſin*, when left without reſtraint, to bring on univerſal depravity and general ruin. It is an active and a diffuſive evil, which in one form or other, is perpetually communicating itſelf. It is a contagion that ſpreads, a leaven that inſinuates itſelf, not by its iufluence on the individual alone, but by its tendencies to corrupt the whole maſs of ſociety. Hence we are inſtructed by the ſcripture that, when the inhabitants of the world were confined to one pair, ſin corrupted them both: as men increaſed upon the earth, it extended its deſtructive influence to whole cities, and from them to ſtill larger communities; ſo that, at the period of the flood, *the whole earth was corrupt before God.*

It is an *infatuation* leading on and precipitating men to deſtruction; and, it is doubtleſs for this reaſon, we find it compared to the principle of

error in the loſt ſheep, and to the headlong indiſcretion of the wretched prodigal: yea, ſo intoxicating and maddening is the influence of ſin that, we are expreſsly told, the inhabitants of the old world, notwithſtanding all that was done to apprize them of their danger and to reclaim them to righteouſneſs, continued *to eat and to drink, to marry and to be given in marriage, till the day that the flood came and deſtroyed them all!* *

What a leſſon is here to the ſenſualiſt, to the ſecure and formal profeſſor of religion, to the rich fool and to the fooliſh virgin!

But, although theſe obſervations may contribute ſomething in illuſtration of the nature and tendencies of ſin, the prophet's deſign, in this context, will not be ſufficiently underſtood, without conſidering its influence with reſpect to his own nation. His object is manifeſtly to impreſs that people with the fearful extent and magnitude of their particular tranſgreſsions. The detail therefore given in this chapter is

* Luke xvii. 27.

truly awful, and eſpecially when we conſider the *character* they held amongſt the nations, as the *people of Jehovah!*

Ignorance of God! Rebellion againſt His juſt authority! In appearance and by profeſsion, the worſhippers of the true God, but in reality idolaters! Groſsly immoral in their general practice, and flagrantly unjuſt in the adminiſtration of the laws!

Such was the character of Iſrael in the time of the prophet, and a more ſhocking combination of deformities can hardly be imagined, in the moral condition of any people: for, it deſerves *our* particular notice, that, at the very moment, when their national conduct was preſenting theſe frightful forms of guilt in the face of heaven—*they ſought Him daily, and delighted to know Him, as a nation that did righteouſneſs, and forſook not the ordinances of their God; they aſked of Him ordinances of juſtice, they took delight in approaching to God!* *

* Isa. lviii. 2.

We hence infer (and this conſideration gives a peculiar emphaſis to their guilt) that their accumulated and enormous offences aroſe from their *ignorance* or their *abuſe* of religion. Their national ignorance could not be innocent, for they poſſeſſed excluſively the means of knowledge: their abuſe of religion was more culpable than ſimple ignorance, even ſuppoſing this to ariſe from neglect—for, it implied, in their caſe, the deliberate proſtitution of that beſt gift of God, religion, to the purpoſes of ſenſual gratification, pharifaical pride or ſecular aggrandizement. Indeed, their hiſtory demonſtrates that, with ordinances of religion the moſt authentic, awful and impreſsive, they had combined, and in their moſt odious forms, hypocriſy, ſuperſtition and the moſt fottiſh idolatry.

But how are theſe appearances, in the conduct of this nation, to be ſolved? This enquiry is to *us*, perhaps, one of the moſt ſerious and appropriate inſtructions of the paſſage. The *moral character of a whole people* (and the prophet ſpeaks generally) is not produced in a moment—it is a deliberate and a progreſsive

operation—it ſuppoſes the application and the influence of ſtrong and adequate cauſes—of cauſes, which may and ought to be diſtinctly traced, and which, when duly appreciated, will be found as regular in their operation, as the ordinances of heaven.

It is not enough here to talk of the influence of climate as giving ſpring to the paſsions, or impreſsing on this people a character of levity rarely conſiſtent with ſound morals:—it will not reach the caſe to tell us, that their vicinity to the nations, which knew not Jehovah, furniſhed them with the means and the motives to idolatry—theſe things had, no doubt, their influence; but they contain not all nor even the principal of thoſe moral cauſes which ſo fatally contributed to their national degeneracy. The awful fact was, THE FOUNTAINS OF PUBLIC MORALS WERE CORRUPT; for, if we except ſome ſhort intermiſsions, during the more exemplary reigns of particular kings, their PRIESTHOOD, though a divine and highly diſtinguiſhed inſtitution, exhibited little more than a graduated ſcale of eccleſiaſtical traffickers, *every one ſeeking his gain from his quarter!*

The deciſions of their doctors, which, in the event, became oracular, were notoriouſly formed upon ſuch principles, as made *void the law of God*:—their modes of diſpenſing with the obligation of plain and indiſpenſible duties, were nothing leſs than the low artifice and colluſion of a contemptible caſuiſtry, adapted to the ignorance of a degraded people, for the baſe purpoſe of acquiring *filthy lucre*:* ſo, that when the meſſenger of the covenant came to his temple, he found it pre-occupied and defiled by a *den of thieves*. The fearful conſequence was, *the key of knowledge being taken away*, their guides *entered not in themſelves, and thoſe that were entering in, they hindered.*†

Should it then furpriſe us, when the ſtreams of public inſtruction that iſſued from the temple and which ought to have been *healing waters*, were thus poiſoned in their ſource; if *the whole head was ſick, and the whole heart faint; if from the crown of the head to the ſole of the foot there was no ſoundneſs, but wounds and bruiſes and putrifying ſores!*‡

* Matt. vii. 11. † Luke xi. 52. ‡ Iſa. i. 5. 6.

But the paſſage before us, while it ſo forcibly deſcribes the character and leads us back to the ſource of Iſrael's tranſgreſsions, directs us alſo to contemplate the *cauſes of their preſervation.*

Though their ſins were as *ſcarlet* they were not at once, nor till after a long ſucceſsion of ages, given over to deſtruction. In the text the *cauſe* of this wonderful forbearance is in part aſsigned—it is this—*except the Lord of Hoſts had left us a very ſmall remnant, we ſhould have been as Sodom,* and *we ſhould have been like unto Gomorrah.*

This remnant, to whoſe exiſtence the general preſervation is aſcribed, was his *true church:* not the general body of the Jewiſh people, for, as we have already ſeen, the great maſs of theſe were in rebellion againſt God;—but that conſecrated few whom Jehovah had redeemed from the prevailing iniquity, and devoted to himſelf a peculiar people, zealous of good works.

They were not all Iſrael, that were of Iſrael. —This diſtinction, made by St. Paul at a later period, applies to the times in queſtion and for the ſame reaſon. The mere poſſeſsion of Jewiſh privileges did not conſtitute a man a true member of that church: — *he was not a Jew who was one outwardly, neither was that circumciſion which was outward in the fleſh; but he was a Jew that was one inwardly, and circumciſion was that of the heart, in the ſpirit, and not in the letter.* *

So eſſential is this diſtinction to a juſt eſtimate of religion, whether we conſider the thing perſonally, or on the wider ſcale of a public profeſsion, that we ſhall be liable perpetually to miſtake or to pervert the ſcriptures, without it. Nor ſhould it here be diſſembled that, an inattention to this important diſcrimination, on the part of the Jews, was a principal, if not the leading cauſe of the perverſion of their ritual, of the corrupt and deſtructive gloſſes impoſed upon their law, together with that hoſt of vices, which, *iſſuing from the ſources of public know-*

* Rom. ii. 29.

ledge generally corrupted, pervaded every claſs; and like an irreſiſtible torrent levelled, in its dreadful courſe, every principle of individual and of public ſecurity; till that devoted nation, deluged by its crimes, became an example of general ruin!

But if we would juſtly appreciate the value of ſuch a church, as this diſtinction ſuppoſes, in its influence on the liberty, the virtue and the ſecurity of nations; it will be neceſſary that we conſider diſtinctly ſome of thoſe advantages which appear to reſult from its eſtabliſhment in any country. And it muſt be evident here that, the very being of ſuch a ſociety pre-ſuppoſes the grant of a divine revelation, together with the inſtitution of public ordinances, for the purpoſe of making that revelation underſtood. Now, the influence which the benevolent ſpirit of the ſcriptures thus promulgated muſt have on the legiſlature of ſuch a country; and the effect which the obſervation of the ſabbath, aided by a knowledge of religion, thus generally diffuſed, muſt be expected to produce on the moral principle of its inhabitants, are truths ſo ſtrongly

atteſted by univerſal experience, that no government will long continue free, nor its ſubjects happy, where theſe ſources of public influence are either greatly corrupted or entirely cut off.

The pſalmiſt, when ſpeaking in his *political* capacity, pronounces the people *bleſſed, who are in ſuch a caſe:* and it is preſumed, we may, without much riſk, appeal from the noiſy and intemperate ſpeculations of modern theoriſts, whoſe avowed object it is to effect a total diſſolution between religion and civil polity, to the wiſe and temperate deciſions of ſuch a judge.

Nor is it by theſe attendant circumſtances alone that the exiſtence of the true church of Chriſt contributes to the general happineſs: its very *character* will ſhew how much that nation muſt be advantaged, that is honoured by its reſidence amongſt them.

In the old teſtament this church is expreſsly called a *bleſsing*,* or, the inſtituted means

* Iſa. xix. 24. Prov. xi. 11.

of conveying and ſecuring bleſsings wherever it is placed. It is farther repreſented by Iſaiah as the *ſubſtance** of the land—that precious treaſure which gives it its genuine worth, and forms the main pillar of public ſecurity: and in the varied deſcriptions of our Saviour and his Apoſtles in the new, it is repreſented as the *light of the world*, and the *ſalt of the earth*—characters, which, at the leaſt, expreſs the united and powerful advantages of inſtruction and example;* and how eſſentially theſe muſt contribute to the temporal good of any country, it would be ſuperfluous in this place to ſhew.

Beſides, it is abundantly manifeſt that the planting and eſtabliſhment of ſuch a church brings with it the ſpecial care of providence, ſo far as the intereſts of this church are concerned: and in the adminiſtration of this care a variety of bleſsings are extended to others. This fact is plainly ſuppoſed in the text, and it is ſufficiently corroborated by thoſe paſſages which promiſe—that, for *the elect's ſake the days of tribulation ſhould be ſhortened*; as well as by thoſe examples

* Iſa. vi. 13.

which ſhew that, God has forborn to deſtroy whole communities till this remnant has either been withdrawn or become extinct.*

Nor ſhould the influence of this church, in its *interceſſory character*, be overlooked or forgotten by us. We are aſſured that, *the effectual fervent prayer of the righteous availeth much with God*; † and it is manifeſt from the ſame ſcriptures that He has often been entreated by this remnant, on the behalf of thoſe with whom they have ſojourned. Thus we ſee the judgments of heaven withdrawn from Egypt, on the pious ſupplication of Moſes. Rain was withheld and given, at the requeſt of Elijah; and what is recorded in the prophet of Noah, Daniel and Job, though it ſuppoſes an extreme caſe, in which ſuch interceſsion will not avail, to the ſalvation of a country; yet, it forcibly eſtabliſhes the general doctrine.

Such then are the important and evident advantages to a country, from the eſtabliſhment,

* The examples of Sodom and of the old world confirm this laſt remark.

† Iſa. v. 16. 17. 18.

the character, the example and the interceſsion of the true church of Chriſt: advantages, acknowledged here by the prophet, as the powerful means of Iſrael's preſervation; and it may be added, without which no country, let its means of defence, in other reſpects, be what they may, can long be ſecure.

This obſervation brings us to the application of our ſubject. We have conſidered the fearful catalogue of Iſrael's crimes: we have attempted to trace and to aſsign their true cauſes, the *general corruption of their prieſthood*; and we have ſhewn, from facts that will not be controverted, that, if *His whole diſpleaſure was not, at once, ſuffered to ariſe, it was becauſe His choſen ſtood before him in the gap, to turn away His wrathful indignation, leſt He ſhould deſtroy them.*

Let us then with theſe reflections on our minds, turn to *ourſelves*. Examination here is not only become expedient, but of abſolute neceſsity. The judgments of heaven are at our doors—to conceal therefore or baſely to palliate the cauſes of theſe judgments, is neither the path of integrity, of wiſdom nor of ſafety. We

have too long encouraged the dream of national ſafety, by ſlight enquiries into the cauſes of our calamities, by general and unavailing acknowledgments of our guilt, or by inſincere proteſtations of partial amendment. It is high time then to rouſe from this dangerous, perhaps! fatal ſlumber. This is not a day for ſpeaking half truths, for propheſying ſmooth things. Such meaſures will not ſave us.

The CORE of our national evils has either been overlooked or but ſlightly touched. Our conjectures or violent declamation on the *political cauſes* which are ſaid to have led to our misfortunes, are but the diſturbed imaginations which our ſinful ſlumber has occaſioned. We little ſuſpect as a nation, that mercies have been withdrawn becauſe they have been *abuſed*; or, that judgments are ſtill continued, becauſe the ſins that provoked them are not *yet repented of*.

Without adverting particularly to the *confident boaſt* of our civil privileges—to the new and alarming ſources of national depravity, opened by our *commerce*, and iſſuing in avarice, am-

bition, the insatiable and boundless love of pleasure, discovered by emulation in the almost infinitely varied arts of polite and of vulgar dissipation:—the ABUSE OF OUR RELIGIOUS PRIVILEGES ALONE will more than account for all our national chastisements.

Look then impartially at the *state of religion* amongst us. Compare the sentiments, the tempers and conduct of the generality of professed christians, with the awful verities, the devotional spirit, and the pure morality, every where inculcated in our prayer-book. Examine the cold and formal devotions of our congregations, by that pure and elevated piety which breathes in every line of our stated service. Weigh the boasted morality of the age, which seems in an alarming degree to have eaten out the very spirit of christianity, in the balances of the sanctuary. See, if it correspond to that pattern of conversation which is in heaven: to that spirit of self-denial and that habitual purity of conversation, which holds out at an equal distance the coarse profanation of the vulgar, and the still more corrupt arts of *studied inuendo*. Examine it by that love of God in Christ, which,

in the ſcriptures at leaſt, is the only acknowledged principle of acceptable obedience; and diſcover, if you can, whether its ſplendid charities may be reſolved into this love of God, as their principle and motive.

Go into the *detail* of conduct, and take with you every grain of allowance that can fairly be conceded to human imperfection, and what will you find? Will you diſcover a courſe of action regulated by that divine maxim of the apoſtle—*whatſoever things are true, lovely and of good report?* or, will you not rather find the governing maxims to be ſordid intereſt, ſelfiſh gratification, and the empty and fading breath of human applauſe?

Are we not but too evidently fallen on times, when the high advantages reſulting from religion are either held in contempt; or if they continue to be reſpected, by a decent attention to its forms, yet, the ſpirit and the principle of the thing are ſo far evaporated and loſt, that it ceaſes *practically* to be regarded as the FOUNTAIN OF MORALS AND THE MAIN PILLAR OF NATIONAL SECURITY?

But the miſchiefs ariſing from hence do not expreſs the full extent of the calamity: for, while ignorance and neglect, amongſt all orders, are rapidly preparing the way to a forfeiture of our bleſsings; infidelity, which that ignorance has *invited*, is in full motion—it is aiming to wreſt from us our moſt ſacred privileges. The maſk, which concealed, from popular obſervation, the talent, the deliberate and the malignant hoſtility of deiſm, is now boldly thrown aſide. No longer is it found neceſsary to trace that peſtilent miſchief, in the laboured diſquiſitions of the noble philoſopher, in the poliſhed and glowing numbers of the poet, nor in the ſly and covert attacks of pointed epigram and diſtant inuendo. It has aſſumed the coarſer garb of vernacular epithet, and imitating the broad faſhion of vulgar ſentiment, it offers its perfidious advice to the loweſt claſſes of ſociety. Its purpoſes and its means are now equally avowed.

If it has not as yet ſucceeded in this country, to the full extent of its projected devaſtations, it would be dangerous on our part to infer, that its advocates ſlumber at their poſt—that its means are deſpoiled of their wonted energy, or, that *we* are, at all points, invulnerable.

It is incumbent on *us* to remember that its calculations of ſucceſs, in a neighbouring country, have been verified to an aſtoniſhing exactneſs; and we may be aſſured, it aſſumes, in every country, the ſame principles as the baſis of thoſe calculations.

AN ERRONEOUS, A CARELESS AND A SECULAR PRIESTHOOD--A CORRUPTED OR NEGLECTED RELIGION—AN INFIDEL, A VAIN AND A DISSOLUTE PEOPLE—theſe are the DATA of theſe abandoned projectors: nor is it poſsible for human ingenuity to conceive any principles of moral reaſoning more uniform in their operation, or more infallibly certain in their general conſequences :—and nothing, it is reſpectfully preſumed, can evince a ſtronger ſymptom of declining virtue, or be conſidered a more fatal preſage of impending deſtruction, than that fatal ſecurity, in any country, which induces the contrary ſentiment.

But, if the nations of Europe and of the world will ſtill perſiſt in treating theſe fears as viſionary; or, at the leaſt, in conſidering the principles which have given them birth, as *problematical:* let them turn their eyes from prin-

ciples to facts, from reaſoning to experience. Let them read, with trembling, the diſtinct, the authoritative and impreſsive leſſon for the day —in the proſtrate church, in the deſpoiled, degraded and diſperſed clergy, of a nation; whoſe corrupt and ſuperſtitious abuſe of religion gave birth to its infidelity, whoſe infidelity has in return deſtroyed its religion, and whoſe immoralities, generated by both, have produced a tiſſue of crimes, unexampled in the hiſtory of man!

Under theſe impreſsions, the preacher reſpectfully claims from this audience a candid interpretation of the ſentiments now uttered, and of the motives which have induced him to chuſe *this* as the proper place for their diſcuſsion. To diſsemble his fears for the ark of Jehovah would, with his convictions, be hypocriſy; to withhold or to palliate, from an exceſſive devotion to any claſs of prejudices or of men, the *cauſes* of that danger, would be cowardice; and to forbear from ſtating explicitly the means of ſtaying or of averting the threatened calamity, would be a dereliction of duty for which he does not feel himſelf prepared to anſwer at the tribunal of God.

Let it not however be imputed to him that he has this day held forth a preſumptuous hand for its protection. He deprecates alike the preſumption that would dictate, and the injuſtice that would cenſure, without diſcrimination. He is only ſolicitous that the ſtreams, iſsuing from theſe fountains of public morals, may become pure and ſalutary—that the leaves which grow on theſe trees of knowledge may contribute, as they ſhould do, to the healing of the nation; and that the ſchools of our prophets recovering and exceeding in their ancient ſplendour, a race of men may proceed from hence, that under God, ſhall become the ſtability of our diſtracted times, the reſtorers of our departing glory, the defence of our church and the honour of our nation!

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